DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 094 CS 212 811

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TITLE Teaching Composition across the Curriculum in Southeastern Alabama and in Suffolk County, England.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; English Instruction; Foreign Countries; Science Instruction; Secondary Education; Social Studies; Surveys; Teacher Behavior; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Alabama; *England; Teacher Surveys

ABSTRACT

A study compared the teaching of composition in secondary British and American schools in the areas of English, social studies, and science. Surveys were returned by 223 teachers in the southeastern Alabama area (out of 310 surveys sent) and by 48 teachers in Suffolk County, England (out of 87 surveys requested). Low response from teachers in England limited the comparisons to those across the curriculum in America and between English teachers in America and England. Results indicated that: (1) teachers relied heavily on transactional writing; (2) most English teachers were teaching and assigning writing for a limited audience--the teacher--and for a limited purpose--to convey information; (3) in American schools, teachers across the curriculum emphasized expository writing with a focus on organization; and (4) American students were also writing for a limited audience--the teacher--who gave the final evaluation. (The survey instrument and four tables of data are attached.) (RS)

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Teaching Composition across the Curriculum in Southeastern Alabama and in Suffolk County, England

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Teaching Composition across the Curriculum in Southeastern Alabama and in Suffolk County, England

Last year I received, along with another member of our English Department, a grant from TSU to conduct a survey of the teaching of composition in both British and American schools. The survey would be at the secondary level in three areas: English, social studies and science. We had two basic questions:

1. Is there a difference in the way composition is taught and/or assigned across the curriculum? And is there a difference in teacher training and experience and in writing requirements across the curriculum?
2. Is there a difference in the way composition is taught in the English classroom in British and American schools?

For our survey instrument we used a printed questionnaire which was distributed by mail. In southeastern Alabama we sent out 310 surveys and 223 were returned. In England, our mailing was handled through a former student who was working for Troy State at their branch campus on the Woodbridge Military Base in Suffolk County. She sent 117 letters to headmasters, but only 87 surveys were requested. Despite follow-up telephone calls, only 48 were returned, and 28 of these were from English teachers. We concluded that the good response to our survey in Alabama was due to the Troy State letterhead which is familiar to most teachers in the area. In England, we would probably have had a better response if we had had a contact in the British schools rather than a representative of an American university.

However, we were able to make comparisons across the curriculum in America and to compare English teacher to English teacher in British and American

schools. We'll look first at the questionnaire and our findings across the curriculum in Alabama where surveys were completed by 113 English teachers, 67 social studies teachers, and 43 science teachers.

Sections 1 and 2 relate to research question #1, which investigates differences in teacher experience, training, and writing requirements, some interesting differences across the curriculum emerge from the survey: English teachers are likely to have more preparations per day, they tend to assign slightly longer compositions, and along with social studies teachers, they assign more writing than science teachers. But there are many similarities also Most teachers have 20-30 students per class, approximately half the teachers have some training in teaching composition, and most rate that training as fair or good. They favor WAC, but their schools have no means for implementing such a program. Most of the teachers had from 11-20 years of experience , and they assign writing both in and out of the classroom.

In Sections 3 through 7 teachers responded to each item by indicating Never (1), Sometimes (2), or Regularly (3). If the mean score by subject area was less than 2, we concluded that there was relatively little use of this strategy in the classroom. If the mean fell between 2 and 2.5, most of the teachers used this strategy sometimes. If the mean was over 2.5, a majority of the teachers used this strategy on a very regular basis.

Items in Section 3 focus on Prewwriting. Janet Emig identified two categories of teacher intervention in the writing process: some activities establish constraints and others profer freedom. English teachers regularly use content covered in class as a basis for a writing assignment, and they regularly require drafts. They assign topics for investigation outside the classroom, use writing models, textbook directions, and explanatory sheets, and they require outlines on a fairly regular basis. All these items suggest a regular pattern of teacher intervention and constraint during the prewriting

phase. None of the constraining items were marked "Never" by a majority of the English teachers. In contrast, content area teachers are less likely to intervene, but

this is probably because, overall, they use prewriting activities less frequently than English teachers.

In addition to establishing constraints, English teachers also indicate a more frequent use of activities which encourage freedom. They will sometimes use brainstorming, free writing, and sentence-combining activities. While content area teachers rarely use these strategies, they do use A-V materials to generate ideas for writing. None of the teachers indicate much use of drama as a form of prewriting.

Items in Section 4 focus on types of writing assignments. Emig also classified student writings as extensive with the purpose being to communicate a message to others or reflexive where the writers focus on their own thoughts and feelings. English teachers tend to encourage more reflexive writing than content area teachers. They assign journals and diaries, allow free choice of topics, and encourage a personal response to assigned readings. However, content area teachers do assign notetaking for personal reference more often than English teachers do.

All three subject areas encourage extensive writing; they assign comparison/contrast papers and summaries on a fairly regular basis. English and social studies teachers also require writing directions and descriptions as a part of the class routine. Only English teachers assign persuasion, poetry and short stories on a fairly regular basis, and these three assignments might be considered reflexive, depending upon the sense of audience. All three subject areas rarely assign plays or autobiographies.

Section 5 focuses on skills to be developed. Certain survey items suggest an emphasis on mechanical accuracy and form; they are mechanics and grammar,

citation and bibliographic form, spelling and definition of technical vocabularly, and editing. Overall, English teachers place much emphasis on mechanical accuracy and form, social studies teachers do so on a fairly regular basis, but science teachers rarely do.

Six survey items in Section 5 identify skills in acquiring and organizing information: library skills, notetaking and summarizing, outlining and organizing, relaying facts, developing and supporting a topic sentence, and organizing facts and generalizations. Overall, all three subject areas develop these particular skills on a fairly regular basis with English teachers putting a special emphasis on developing and supporting a topic sentence.

English teachers spend more time on rhetorical and stylistic devices than content area teachers. They regularly develop skill in writing for a definite purpose, and they spend at least some time on writing from a specific point of view and for a specific audience, assuming an appropriate voice and tone, varying sentence structure, and using transitions. Social studies and science teachers will occasionally ask students to write for a definite purpose, but the other items in this group are rarely developed in the content areas.

Seven of the survey items are related to the development of intellectual strategies in connection with the development of writing skills. All three subject areas focus on five of these skills at least sometimes; they develop skills in discovering generalizations in facts, identifying generalizations, seeing relationships, drawing conclusions, and solving problems. Both English and social studies teachers also focus on developing original ideas, but only English teachers work with analogies. Overall, the intellectual strategies used in writing are not being neglected in any of the subject areas surveyed.

Items in Section 6 identify a response to student writing. Two items from Section 6 can be related to a response from the teacher. English teachers are

more involved than content area teachers in responding to student writing as a part of the writing process. They regularly use written comments and sometimes use teacher/student conferences to provide this response. Social studies teachers use written comments occasionally but neither social studies nor science teachers incorporate teacher/student conferences into their classroom activities.

When teacher comments are offered, the focus of those comments varies across subject areas. English teachers will first discuss mechanics and usage, second writing strategies, and third syntax and rhetoric. Content area teachers cite these elements much less frequently. Over 60% never discuss any of these items. Yet, overall, mechanics is the highest rated category within the content areas as a focus for discussion.

Five items from Section 6 identify a response from classmates or from an audience outside the classroom. English teachers regularly read papers aloud, but they rarely make copies for class discussion, arrange for peer group response, or encourage publication in-school or outside the classroom. Content area teachers rarely provide for any kind of peer or out-of-class response.

Items in Section 7 focus on evaluation of writing. Some survey items can be related to formative evaluation; that is, the teacher is evaluating but is also providing guidance and direction for future writing projects. Teachers in all three subject areas may use a combination of grades and comments but they rarely use comments only or evaluate during teacher/student conferences. And they do not use peer groups or self-evaluation as part of the evaluation process. Only English teachers indicate a fairly regular use of portfolios with student writings filed for ongoing evaluation.

Seven survey items suggest a summative of final evaluation. None of the teachers evaluate using only a grade or evaluate for form alone. And they are

not likely to use rating scales or primary trait scoring guides. But they will consider mastery of material as part of the evaluation on a fairly regular basis. English teachers rarely evaluate content without form, but they regularly consider both as well as the ability to write in a specific style. Content area teachers will sometimes evaluate content without consideration of form, and they are likely to consider a combination of both, but they rarely look for a specific style. Overall, teachers in all three areas are more likely to use summative than formative evaluation procedures.

Research question #1 focused on the differences in the teaching of composition across the curriculum. In general, it is handled differently in the English classroom. English teachers use prewriting activities more frequently, and these activities may either put constraints on students or allow them freedom to develop their essays. English teachers encourage more reflexive writing than content area teachers. English teachers place more emphasis on mechanical accuracy, they devote more time to rhetorical and stylistic devices, and they are more involved than content area teachers in responding to student writing.

But there are some similarities too. All three groups of teachers emphasize extensive or an expository type of writing, they emphasize acquiring and organizing information and developing intellectual strategies for writing. None of the three groups encourage peer response to writing or writing for an audience outside the classroom. Teachers in all three areas use more summative than formative evaluation.

In regard to the British surveys, we compared what was happening in English classrooms in Alabama and in English classrooms in Suffolk County, England. Research question #2 focused on the differences between American and British teachers of English. Teachers in both groups who responded to the survey were experienced with 11-20 years in the classroom. American teachers tend to have

fewer preparations per day, but there is little difference in class size. Over half the English teachers in both countries had no training in the teaching of composition. Most teachers were in favor of WAC although their schools made no provision for this. British teachers tend to require longer compositions and to make more assignments than American teachers. Americans require more in-class writing than the British.

We also looked at the results of the survey in British and American classrooms in relation to the work of James Britton and his colleagues. Although they analyzed student writings and we were looking at teacher responses, we wanted to know if certain teacher classroom strategies and goals would evoke the same kind of student writing that Britton had found. Your second handout has four charts which reflect this comparison. The dark circles represent British teachers; the open circles represent American teachers.

You will recall that when Britton analyzed student writings, he found that most of the students were writing for a very limited audience, and that audience was the "Teacher." And the teacher was usually cast in two very limited roles, either as one who gives advice on revising or one who evaluates. Britton called these subcategories "teacher/learner dialogue" and "pupil to examiner. Exhibit A lists certain survey items which can be related to writing for the teacher, that is, these particular classroom activities would probably reinforce a sense of teacher as the main audience.

Both American and British teachers regularly use activities that tend to encourage the teacher/learner dialogue.

Nineteen survey items reflect the "pupil to examiner" mode, that is, students were writing for the teacher and expecting an evaluation. Although their individual responses are not identical, both British and American teachers place a heavy emphasis on this type of response. Out of 19 items British teachers identified thirteen and Americans identified twelve as being

used regularly or sometimes.

In contrast, Britton found a smaller portion of student writings in the remaining audience categories which moved beyond the teacher as audience. Exhibit B lists comparable survey items, and the results tend to confirm Britton's finding that there is little writing for an audience beyond the teacher and little writing for the teacher beyond the evaluator or responder role. None of the survey items in Exhibit B were used regularly. Out of the 11 items, 7 were marked never by the American teachers and 8 by the British.

In regard to function or purpose, Britton found most student writings falling into a limited number of categories with a focus on transactional writing and lower level thinking skills--transactional writing being the writing of the world when the purpose is to accomplish a goal.

The survey responses as listed in Exhibit C suggest British and American teachers are encouraging writing which falls into the transactional mode with the sub-categories of report; analogic, low level of generalization; and analogic being part of transactional writing. Out of 19 items, the British teachers marked 11 and the Americans marked 12 that were used on a fairly regular basis, and the Americans marked three that were used regularly.

In additional to Transactional writing, Britton also found Poetic writing occurring frequently in English and Religion classes. This type of writing focuses not on exposition but uses language as an art medium. Both British and American teachers assign poetry and short stories fairly often, and the British also assign plays.

Most of the items that were associated with frequent student writing in Britton's survey are used on a fairly regular basis in both British and American classrooms. But very few are used consistently, and about one-third of the items are rarely used. Overall, the surveys confirm Britton's findings in

regard to function, with American teachers tending to emphasize these assignments and skills even more than the British do.

Britton found a small portion of student writings falling into the remaining function categories which move from simple recording to arguing, speculating, and persuading. He also found very little expressive writing, the type of writing which Britton sees as the source of all other writing.

The survey responses in Exhibit D indicate that both British and American teachers are working more in these areas than Britton's research would suggest. There was little response at the "record" or "generalized narration" levels but both groups work on a fairly regular basis on making analogies, drawing conclusions, solving problems, developing original ideas, and writing persuasion, as well as assigning journals and a personal response to reading. However, none of the items were marked to indicate regular classroom instruction.

Overall, teacher responses suggest a heavy emphasis on transactional writing with perhaps a stronger emphasis on higher level thinking skills than Britton found in student compositions. However, it could be that if we analyzed actual student compositions from these classrooms, they might not reflect the higher level thinking skills which the teachers are encouraging.

In conclusion English teachers in Suffolk County, England, and in southeastern Alabama have much in common when they teach writing. And 16 years after Britton published his study, most of the English teachers surveyed are still teaching and assigning writing for a limited audience--the teacher--and a limited purpose--to convey information. And in American schools, teachers across the curriculum are still emphasizing expository writing with a focus on organization. And students are writing for a limited audience--the teacher who gives the final evaluation. The June 1990 report from the NAEP reinforces the need for more and better writing instruction in our schools. The researchers

found little time for writing instruction and a poor showing on writing samples. One implication of such national research as well as the limited research of this survey would be more pre-service training in composition theory for all secondary teachers, not just future English teachers. And of course, continued in-service training such as Writing Projects and writing across the curriculum for teachers in all subject areas.

Britton J., Burgess, T. Martin, N., McLeod, A., and Rosen, H. The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18). London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975.

Emig, J. "On Teaching Composition: Some Hypotheses as Definitions." Research in the Teaching of English 1 (1967): 127-135.

A SURVEY OF THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM AND IN THE CONTENT AREAS OF SOCIAL STUDIES AND SCIENCE

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Section 1 TEACHING ASSIGNMENT AND EXPERIENCE

1. Number of years teaching experience

_____ (1) 1-5 years

_____ (2) 6-10 years

_____ (3) 11-20 years

_____ (4) 21-30 years

_____ (5) 31-40 years

2. Number of different preparations per school day

_____ (1) 1-2

_____ (2) 3-4

_____ (3) 5 or more

3. Average class size

_____ (1) under 20

_____ (2) 20-25

_____ (3) 26-30

_____ (4) 30-35

_____ (5) over 35

4. Did your undergraduate college courses provide any training for teaching composition?

_____ Yes

_____ (1) No

5. If you answered "Yes" to #4, evaluate your training in the teaching of composition.

_____ (2) Good

_____ (3) Fair

_____ (4) Poor

6. In your opinion, teaching composition is the responsibility of

_____ (1) The English teacher

_____ (2) The content area teacher

_____ (3) Both English and content area teachers

7. Is there a plan for cooperation between the English Department and the content areas for the teaching of composition in your school?

_____ (1) Yes

_____ (2) No

Section 2 COMPOSITION REQUIREMENTS

DIRECTIONS: The following items refer to all writing assignments and essay tests. Please limit your responses to ONE SPECIFIC SUBJECT AND ONE SPECIFIC GRADE or AGE GROUP. Indicate the subject and grade that will be directing your response.

1. SUBJECT ASSIGNMENT

_____ (1) English

_____ (2) Social Studies

_____ (3) Science

2.

	GRADE	AGE
_____ (1)	7	12-13 years
_____ (2)	8	13-14 years
_____ (3)	9	14-15 years
_____ (4)	10	15-16 years
_____ (5)	11	16-17 years
_____ (6)	12	17-18 years

3. What is the approximate length of most writing assignments in your class? (check one)

_____ (1) Less than 100 words

_____ (2) 100-299 words

_____ (3) 300-499 words

_____ (4) 500-1500 words

_____ (5) Over 1500 words

4. Approximately how many writing assignments do you make during a school year? (check one)

_____ (1) 1-5

_____ (2) 6-10

_____ (3) 11-20

_____ (4) 21-30

_____ (5) 31-40

_____ (6) 41 or more

5. Where are most of the writing assignments completed?

_____ (1) In the classroom

_____ (2) Outside the classroom

_____ (3) Both in and outside the classroom

DIRECTIONS: In Sections 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, respond to each item by indicating how frequently the particular activity or assignment is emphasized in your classroom. Indicate Never (1), Sometimes (2), or Regularly (3) by circling the appropriate number. Respond according to the SPECIFIC SUBJECT and GRADE LEVEL you have previously identified.

Section 3 PREWRITING STRATEGIES

How often are the following strategies used to direct the writing process in your classroom?

1 2 3 6. Discussion of topics based on content covered in class
1 2 3 7. Discussion of topics for investigation outside the classroom
1 2 3 8. Brainstorming sessions to discover topics
1 2 3 9. A-V materials to stimulate topics
1 2 3 10. Drama activities
1 2 3 11. Free writing exercises
1 2 3 12. Sentence-combining exercises
1 2 3 13. Use of writing models
1 2 3 14. Use of textbook directions as guides for writing
1 2 3 15. Explanatory sheet setting up guidelines for assignment
1 2 3 16. Making a draft before the final copy
1 2 3 17. Making an outline before the final copy

Section 4 TYPES OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Consider the following types of writing assignments. How often are they used in your classroom?

1 2 3 18. Journals and/or diaries
1 2 3 19. Personal response to assigned readings
1 2 3 20. Notetaking for personal reference
1 2 3 21. Free choice of topics by students
1 2 3 22. Writing directions
1 2 3 23. Social letters
1 2 3 24. Business letters
1 2 3 25. Eyewitness accounts of observations
1 2 3 26. Comparison and contrast
1 2 3 27. Narration of events
1 2 3 28. Description of a person, place, or object
1 2 3 29. Summaries from texts or periodicals
1 2 3 30. Research paper
1 2 3 31. Argumentation
1 2 3 32. Persuasion
1 2 3 33. Poetry
1 2 3 34. Short stories
1 2 3 35. Plays
1 2 3 36. Autobiographies

Section 5 SKILLS TO BE DEVELOPED

The following list includes various skills to be developed in writing assignments. To what degree are they emphasized in your classroom?

1 2 3 37. Mastering mechanics and grammar
1 2 3 38. Using citation and bibliographic form for research papers
1 2 3 39. Developing library skills for locating reference material
1 2 3 40. Mastering spelling and definition of technical vocabulary
1 2 3 41. Notetaking and summarizing from reference books
1 2 3 42. Outlining and organizing information
1 2 3 43. Varying sentence structure
1 2 3 44. Using transitions
1 2 3 45. Editing
1 2 3 46. Writing from a specific point of view
1 2 3 47. Writing for a definite purpose
1 2 3 48. Writing for a particular audience
1 2 3 49. Varying voice and tone according to assignment
1 2 3 50. Relaying facts accurately
1 2 3 51. Discovering generalizations in facts
1 2 3 52. Identifying generalizations
1 2 3 53. Seeing relationships between ideas
1 2 3 54. Developing and supporting a topic sentence
1 2 3 55. Organizing facts and generalizations in logical order
1 2 3 56. Making analogies
1 2 3 57. Drawing conclusions
1 2 3 58. Solving problems
1 2 3 59. Developing original ideas

Section 6 RESPONSE TO STUDENT WRITING

After the student's writing has been completed, how often are the following strategies used in your classroom?

1 2 3 60. Read papers aloud to class
1 2 3 61. Discuss papers in peer groups
1 2 3 62. Duplicate student papers for class discussion
1 2 3 63. Encourage submission of papers for publication in school paper or magazine
1 2 3 64. Encourage submission of papers for publication in local newspapers or contests
1 2 3 65. Written comments to guide revision of papers
1 2 3 66. Teacher/student conference to guide revision of papers

If you answered Regularly (3) to 65 or 66, indicate with a check mark the focus of the written comments or conference. (You may check more than one.)

_____ 67. Mechanics: spelling, punctuation
_____ 68. Usage: correct forms, standard English
_____ 69. Syntax: syntactic fluency
_____ 70. Rhetoric: purpose, voice, approach to subject
_____ 71. Writing strategies: focus, change, contrast, logical sequence

Section 7 EVALUATION OF WRITING

How often do you use the following strategies to evaluate writing in your classroom?

1 2 3 72. Evaluate content of paper, but not form (mechanics, grammatical errors, etc.)
1 2 3 73. Evaluate form, but not content of paper
1 2 3 74. Evaluate both content and form
1 2 3 75. Evaluate with letter grade, but no comments
1 2 3 76. Evaluate with comments, but no letter grade
1 2 3 77. Evaluate with combination letter grade and comments

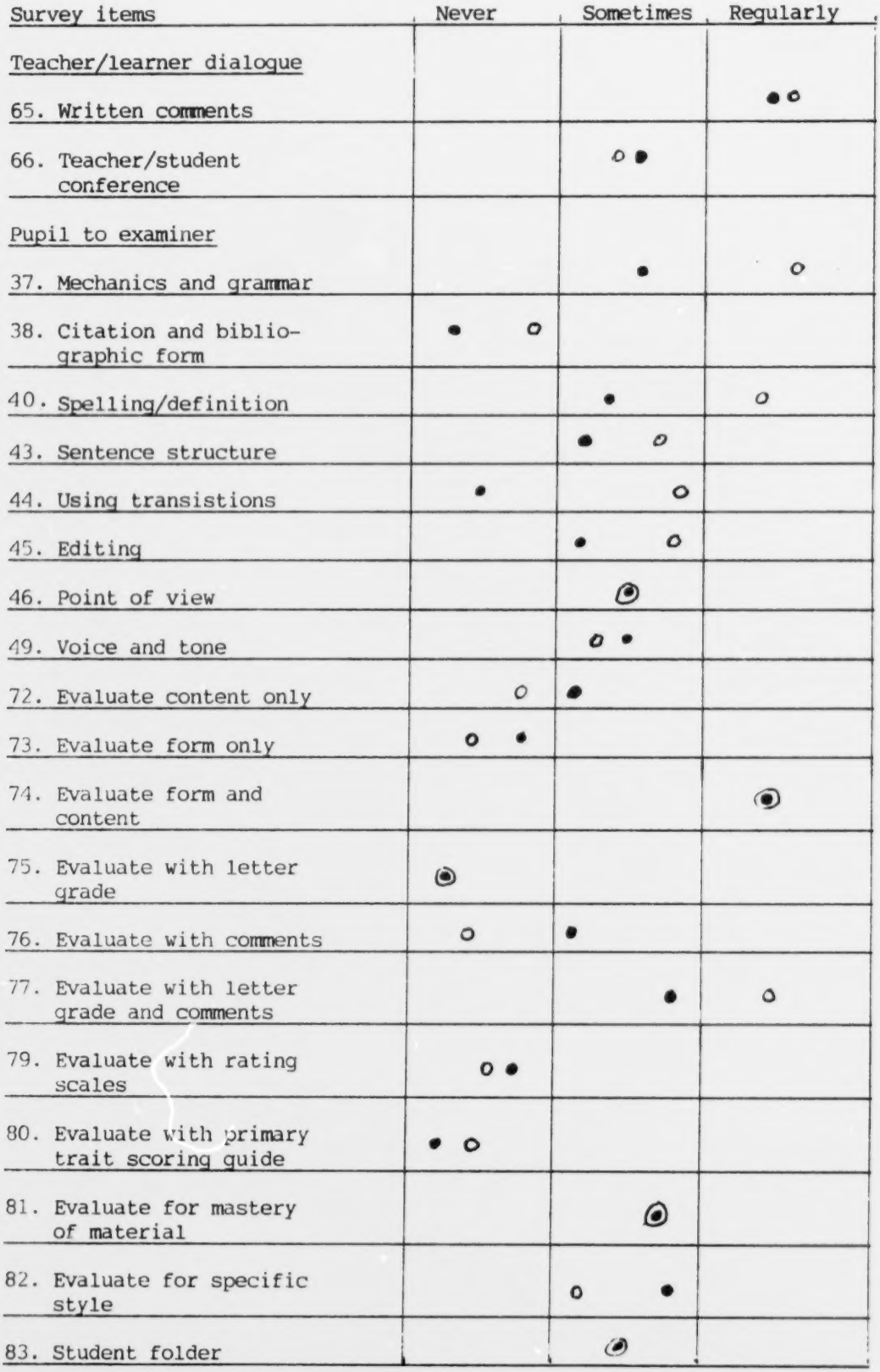
78. If comments are used Regularly (3), either alone or with a letter grade, check the category that is most appropriate.

_____ (1) Comments indicating what was done well
_____ (2) Comments indicating errors in form or reasoning
_____ (3) Combination of both the above

1 2 3 79. Evaluate with rating scales
1 2 3 80. Evaluate with primary trait scoring guides
1 2 3 81. Evaluate for mastery of material and information
1 2 3 82. Evaluate for ability to write in a specific style
1 2 3 83. File in student folder for evaluation of progress
1 2 3 84. Evaluate during teacher/student conference
1 2 3 85. Evaluate in peer groups
1 2 3 86. Self evaluation: student sets goals and evaluates progress

Signature (Optional) _____

British and American Teachers Responding Never, Sometimes, or Regularly to Items Associated with Britton's Audience Categories (Large Portion of student Writing)



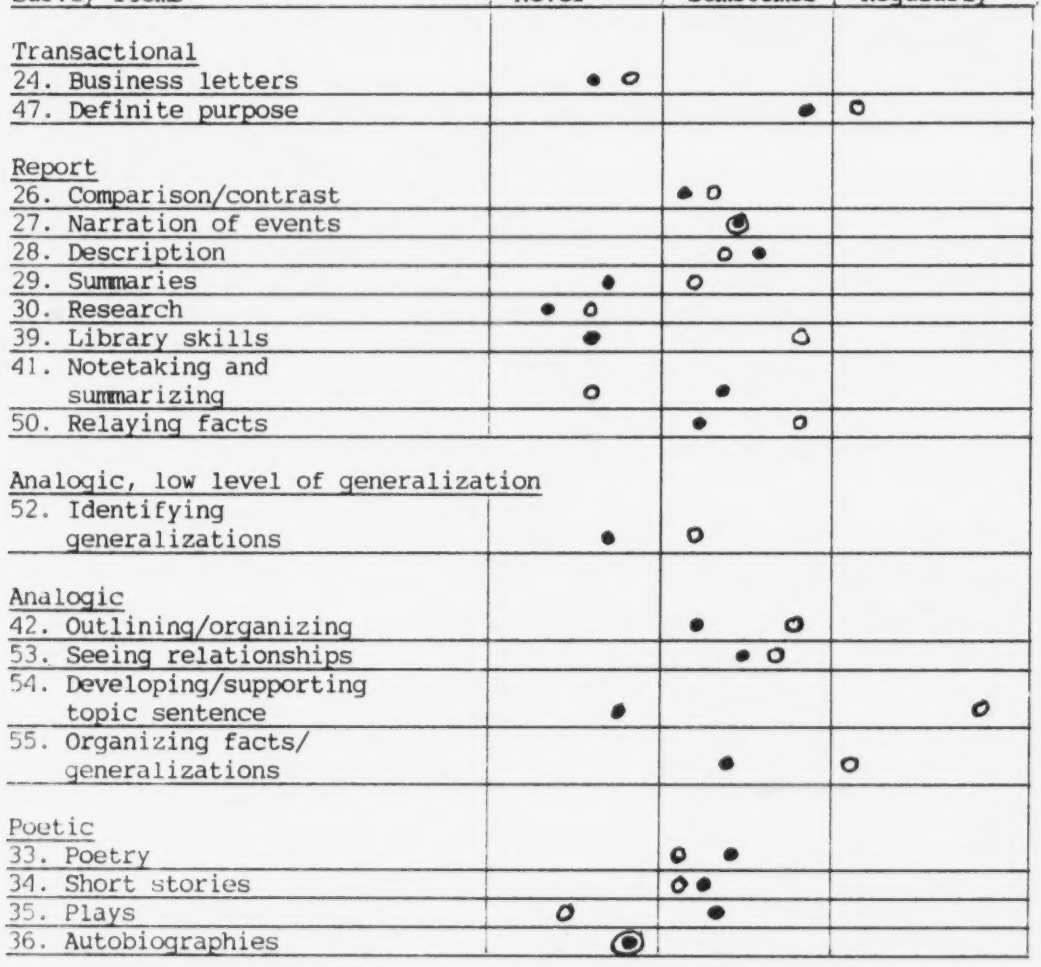
• British English Teachers
o American English Teachers

British and American Teachers Responding Never, Sometimes, or Regularly to Items Associated with Britton's Audience Categories (Small Portion of Student Writing)

Survey items	Never	Sometimes	Regularly
Writing for self			
20. Notetaking for Personal reference		• O	
Child to trusted adult			
21. Free choice of topics		• O	
Pupil to teacher, particular relationship			
84. Evaluate during conference	O	•	
Expert to known layman			
22. Writing directions	•	O	
Child to peer group			
60. Read papers aloud	•	O	
61. Discuss papers in peer groups	• O		
62. Duplicate papers	• O		
85. Evaluate in peer groups	O •		
Group member to working group			
63. Publication in school paper or magazine	• O		
Unknown audience			
64. Publication in local newspapers/contests	• O		
86. Self evaluation	O •		
Audience in general			
48. Writing for a particular audience		◉	

• British English Teachers
O American English Teachers

British and American Teachers Responding Never, Sometimes, or Regularly to Items Associated with Britton's Function Categories (Large Portion of Student Writing)



● British English Teachers
○ American English Teachers

British and American Teachers Responding Never, Sometimes, or Regularly to Items Associated with Britton's Function Categories (Small Portion of Student Writing)

Survey items	Never	Sometimes	Regularly
Record			
25. Eyewitness accounts	●		
Generalized narration or descriptive information			
51. Discovering generalizations	●	○	
Analogic/tautologic (speculative)			
56. Making analogies		● ○	
Tautologic			
57. Drawing conclusions		●	
58. Solving problems		● ○	
59. Developing original ideas		○ ●	
Persuasive			
31. Argumentation	○	●	
32. Persuasion		●	
Expressive			
18. Journals/diaries		○ ●	
19. Personal response to assigned readings		○ ●	
23. Social letters	● ○		

● British English Teachers
○ American English Teachers